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Household appliances and 'systems of provision': a reply

By SUE BOWDEN and AVNER OFFER

Fine takes us to task for our approach to the diffusion of household appliances, and then offers an alternative approach of his own. He argues that economic categories are not appropriate for understanding the diffusion of household appliances, and that we have applied them eclectically. This, he says, has caused our work to 'acquire an arbitrary content'. His strictures are not always easy to follow; they are based on a series of misconceptions, which we shall address in turn. On whether his critique also constitutes an effective challenge to the imperialism of economics (which he appears to deplore), readers will have to make up their own minds.

Fine begins by translating our own concepts of 'time' and 'household appliances' into a different language, as 'time itself and as the materialized productivity of time or physically durable (consumer) equipment', respectively.[1] He says that both concepts are ahistorical, and that they have the potential to be applied in arbitrary and inconsistent ways. Economic categories (and the economic notions of rationality and motivation) are indeed timeless, but not in the sense that they stand outside historical time. Rather, economists assume that they apply throughout historical time. This is merely a way of saying that human nature remains constant in history, while environments, prices, and cultures change. Our critic may dislike this premise, but he presents no arguments in refutation. It is, of course, accepted widely in the social sciences, and we make no apologies.[2]

In his exegesis, Fine makes a distinction between employment, where time is governed primarily by commercial consideration, and domestic labour, where there is no corresponding discipline. This 'is evident from the domestic labour debate', referring to a 30-page passage in his previous work. But there is no evidence contained there, only a discussion of a debate on value.[3] As for employment, he seems to have lost sight of public sector and non-profit work, including his own and ours, where any 'commercial consideration' is at best indirect. Time matters at home as well as in employment. Tell a mother trying to get her children to school, or preparing dinner for a household on several different timetables,

[1] Fine, 'Household appliances', p. 552.

[2] See Brown, *Human universals*.

[3] Fine, 'Household appliances', p. 553. The reference is to *idem*, *Women's employment*, pp. 161-91; the only support is a reference on p. 180 to an article in *New Left Rev.*, with no page references given.

that in the household 'a discipline of time is neither enforced nor liable to be adopted'.[4]

Fine queries our distinction between time saving and time using (which is supported by marketing usage), saying that higher standards of cleaning and washing are indistinguishable, other than in name of activity, from time using for entertainment. This is to confuse *product* with *process*. The time saved was in the *process* of cleaning and washing, which was generally viewed as unpleasant. The quality of output did not have to be higher. How this extra time was used, was left to the cleaner's discretion (she was usually a woman). The concept of time saving stresses the economy of effort, not the quality of output (though the two are not mutually exclusive). That said, it is only in the mind of a theorist that the rewards of cleanliness and entertainment can be confounded. Our disparaged concept of 'arousal' is just what differentiates between the two types of goods: entertainment provides arousal, clean floors do not.

Fault is found with the association we made between furnishing a home and the purchase of household appliances. What we noted was that new housing, furnishings, and appliances were all likely to be purchased at the same time. It is not a matter of income elasticities of demand, but of the timing of major (i.e. 'durable') purchases, which coincide when a new home is being established and equipped. Fine challenges us to extend our analysis of time saving to housing and furniture. That was not part of our original remit, but it does not present a problem: the choice of housing type and its location have profound time-using implications. Suburban housing usually involves the sacrifice of time to commuting, in return for more spacious accommodation, access to rural amenities, clear air, and so on. In its turn, more spacious accommodation requires more housework, while suburban locations make it more difficult for women to travel to work, and require more time to be spent on shopping, ferrying children, and co-ordinating household activities. The categories of time saving and using (like all categories) abstract to some extent from experienced reality, but they stand up well to Fine's strictures.

There might be some ambiguities in gendering categories of goods, but family food (an example he gives) is not one of them. Women dominate the *preparation* of food, rather than its consumption. It is this aspect of gendering that we stress: cleaning, washing, and cooking are all historically women's work, unlike the work of entertainment done effortlessly by radio and television for the whole household. Our assumption that men gave low priority to women's preferences is borne out in a recent oral history of interwar consumption in Coventry:

> Men continued to exert a pervasive influence over spending decisions. Mr L. vetoed house purchase; Mr. W. vetoed perms; Mr Y. vetoed saving in favour of holidays; slightly out of the period Mr R. vetoed carpet in favour of television. And it was always, always men who brought home the radios.
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> Mrs T's father sold vacuum cleaners at one time, so I asked if her mother

[4] See, e.g., DeVault, *Feeding the family*, pp. 122-6.

had one. 'Oh no', she replied, 'he wouldn't have seen the point, the place looked pretty clean without one.'

Mrs N. didn't have an electric iron, downstairs geyser or sewing machine, but Mr N. had a motorbike, camera and cine-camera.[5]

Fine concedes that the concept of patriarchy is not to be found in our article, but then argues as if it were. We observe that women's labour is worth less in the market place than men's. We do not attempt to encompass the reasons, nor all of the implications, for market and household production. It is not clear where 'tautologous reasoning' enters. We did not label goods as gendered according to the gender of those who might benefit from consuming them, but according to whether the benefit was direct or indirect.[6] Fine seems to have missed this point. Hence his counter-example of 'women's, girls' and children's clothing' accounting for a larger share of consumption than clothing for 'men and boys' in 1936, is immaterial. For one thing, there were *more* women, girls, and children than men and boys; for another, we made no claim that the consumption of men would *always* dominate that of women—the material and intangible trade-offs could be complicated; and it is arguable that (unlike clean floors) women's clothing might contribute something to men's arousal.

To say that advertising might cause the product mix to be biased towards expensive goods is odd. Advertising normally follows rather than determines the decision about which markets to target and what mix of products of offer. Cheaper credit might in theory have increased demand, but our point was the factual one that credit allowed consumers to acquire appliances which they could not have purchased, other things being equal.

In discussing the effect of television, tautology is again wrongly invoked. Fine smuggles in an assumption of insatiable demand (which we do not make),[7] and asks why television sets are not in use all the time. In fact (like most economists and psychologists), we assume that stimulation delivers diminishing returns, which is why sets are eventually turned off. What is tautological about that? It is hardly an *ad hoc* assumption, as Fine claims.

He also claims that we 'alternate without thinking between the terms "appliances" and "durables"'.[8] This arises from careless reading. Our scope is defined quite crisply in the very first sentences of the article. Domestic appliances are described as 'the sequence of electrical and mechanical durables . . . cookers, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, washing machines, radios, televisions, air conditioning, microwave ovens'.[9] No room for ambiguity here. Further down the page we talk of household machinery. Hence the comparison with plastic buckets, fixtures and

[5] Whitworth, 'Men, women, shops', pp. 255, 198, 19.
[6] Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 740.
[7] Fine, 'Household appliances', p. 557.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 725.

fittings, clothing, etc., is beside the point. The ability of plastic buckets to affect time use materially (in comparison with tin buckets, for example) is not one of their salient attributes, and they were thus left out of our article. The same applies to antique carpets and old masters, given our definition of household appliances as reproducible machinery.

A household may not be motivated by profit, but its expenditure is constrained by the amount of income which accrues to it periodically. The household appliances we listed were expensive in relation to periodic income accruals, and also lasted a long time. Thus their purchase required (and justified) inter-temporal transfers, either through accumulated savings or through access to credit. That this cost the poor more than the rich is not an assertion derived from ahistorical principles, but an historical fact. Fine says that it is not merely 'physical properties of durability and service to the optimizing consumer' that determined whether goods were purchased or treated as appliances, but also 'the commercial strategy of those providing them'.[10] Now for optimizing households, this commercial strategy presented itself as the purchase price demanded for goods and their running costs, which needed to be set off against their anticipated benefits (including the benefits of social conformity). This is not to say that commercial strategy was irrelevant. We discuss it as a factor in our article, 'The technological revolution'. Our other article, 'Household appliances', was not meant to be the final word on household consumption: we have both written on marketing strategy elsewhere, but always in its interaction with consumer attributes.[11] Fine appears to take consumption norms as given, and says nothing about the diffusion process, which is the subject of our own articles. We see our main contribution to lie in providing measures of actual diffusion, together with some account of the dynamics involved. This is the necessary point of departure (not provided by Fine) for any discussion of norms.

The second part of Fine's comment puts forward his alternative approach: that it is inappropriate to consider the diffusion of household appliances from the point of view of their utility and price. Instead, he argues for a 'theory of provision'.[12] Appliances do not constitute a distinctive category, but rather each needs to be considered on its own, mainly from the point of view of the social norms of possession, and of systems of supply. In our article, we characterized this as a narrative approach.[13] There is nothing wrong with this method, if it is used well. But it is not clear on what basis it can claim, *a priori*, to be entirely sufficient as a causal approach.

Apart from its stress on the supply side, the 'systems of provision' method is hard to distinguish from conventional narratives in economic and social history. But Fine makes strong epistemological claims for it. The imperative dominates throughout. Only one approach is possible.

[10] Fine, 'Household appliances', p. 558.

[11] Bowden, 'Credit facilities'; Bowden and Turner, 'UK market'; Offer, 'Mask of intimacy'; *idem*, 'American automobile frenzy'.

[12] Fine, 'Household appliances'.

[13] Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 727.

Hence, the properties of goods '*cannot serve* as the basis for a causal analysis'; choice '*must* be interpreted in the form of consumption norms'; 'the focus *must*, then be upon specific products ... rather than the imposition of general consideration'; generalization is '*erroneous*'; another author '*correctly* lays out the issues involved'. Finally, the law is laid down: interpretation 'can *legitimately* operate only on the basis of product-specific systems of provision'.[14] But nobody is authorized to lay down what is legitimate or correct in historical interpretation. The economy of explanations, like the market for household appliances (at least in the liberal West), is competitive—not a perfect market perhaps, but certainly not a command economy.

The 'systems of provision' approach, with its emphasis on supply, is not wrong, just one-sided. No doubt there is a richer, more subtle story to be told about each individual category of appliance, then about each individual brand, and finally, perhaps, about each individual fridge and washing machine. But not everyone would care to read it. One pays for generalization with some loss of detail. We remain committed, unrepentantly, to the familiar category of household appliances, and to the study of consumer behaviour through the attributes of people and the attributes of goods, in an historical environment of changing technologies, prices, norms, and yes (why not?), 'systems of provision'.

University of Sheffield
Nuffield College, Oxford

[14] Fine, 'Household appliances', pp. 559-61. Italics added throughout.

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